

PART 1: ABRAHAM, MESOPOTAMIA, AND A PROMISED LAND

by Rabbi Shimon Apisdorf

The story of Israel is an example of history in the extreme. On the one hand, it encompasses the story-the history-of much of the world. On the other hand, it is the story of a tiny people and its relationship to a minute bit of the world's real estate. This book will tell the story of Israel in all its extremes. It will tell the story of much of world history as it unfolded in a theater called Israel-often on a stage called Jerusalem-and it will tell the story of the Jewish people and its relationship to the land called Israel.

All of these extremes can be found in the life of one man who lived in Mesopotamia some 3,670 odd years ago. The man's name was Abraham, and he just happens to have been the first Jew to ever step foot in the land of Israel. So it is with Abraham that we will begin our story of Israel. Abraham grew up in the great city of Ur in Mesopotamia. There, he was exposed to a culture unlike anything that had ever existed before in human history. In Mesopotamia, there were skilled craftsman of all kinds, people who could read and write, an elite cosmopolitan class, and of course an elaborate religious structure. Of all things Mesopotamian, Abraham just couldn't buy the religious beliefs. Despite the fact that he had been raised in a society that knew nothing other than polytheism, it all seemed like nonsense to Abraham. In time, Abraham did more than reject the belief system of his family, friends, and society-he came to a novel and utterly unique conclusion about life. Today we call that conclusion monotheism, the belief in one supreme God who is the sole source of all existence and upon whom everything remains totally dependent. It is at this point of radical departure that the Bible tells us that God appeared to Abraham, confirmed his convictions, told him to pack his bags, and sent him on his first trip to Israel, known then as Canaan.

"And God said to Abraham, 'Go for yourself; away from your land, the place of your birth and your father's house, to the land that I will show you. And I will make you into a great nation, and bless you, and you will be a blessing...' And Abraham took Sarai his wife... and they departed for the land of Canaan, and came to the land of Canaan. And God appeared to Abraham and said, 'To your descendants will I give this land...'"

Genesis 12:1-8

"On that day God sealed a covenant with Abraham, saying, 'To your descendants have I given this land, from the river of Egypt, to the great river, the Euphrates river.'"

Genesis 15:18

It is at this point, at a relatively early period in the history of civilization, that the relationship of the Jewish people—Abraham's descendants—to the land of Israel begins. We are now going to look at the lives of the patriarchs, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. It is these three men, together with their wives and children, that set the cornerstone of Jewish peoplehood, history, and destiny in place. With each, the most seminal events of their lives took place in the land of Israel, and one of them, Isaac, lived his entire life without ever leaving Israel. Let's take a look.

Shimon Apisdorf is the co-founder and educational director of the Jewish Literacy Foundation (JLF). Mr. Apisdorf has authored eight of the foundation's books, including the popular Jewish Holiday "Survival Kit" series. Under Mr. Apisdorf's leadership, JLF has distributed more than 67,000 books to unaffiliated and marginally affiliated Jews across the continent in an effort to educate Jews about their heritage and bring them closer to Judaism.

Most recently, Mr. Apisdorf completed *Israel in a Nutshell, a book that discusses the history of the creation of the State of Israel and the Israeli/Palestinian conflict*. *Israel in a Nutshell is the first book to launch JLF's continent-wide campaign to provide every Jewish home with a Jewish library. This book is part of a series of twelve books entitled Judaism in a Nutshell that addresses modern-day Jewish issues such as God, spirituality, holidays, and interpersonal relationships in a concise format.*

In 1999, Mr. Apisdorf received the Benjamin Franklin Award from the Publishers Marketing Association for *Chanukah: Eight Nights of Light, Eight Gifts for the Soul*, and in 1993 he received the same award for the best-selling *Rosh Hashanah Yom Kippur Survival Kit series*.

Before joining JLF, Mr. Apisdorf was the first Judaic studies teacher hired at the newly founded Columbus Torah Academy High School in 1992 where he taught for three years. From 1991-1993, Mr. Apisdorf was the educational director for the Jewish outreach organization, Aish HaTorah, in Columbus, Ohio. From 1987-1990, Mr. Apisdorf served as the director of special programs for Aish HaTorah in Toronto where he was instrumental in the development of Canada's largest Jewish adult education program. Today, Mr. Apisdorf resides in Baltimore, MD with his wife, Miriam and their four children.

Mr. Apisdorf attended the University of Cincinnati and then went on to study at the Telshe Yeshiva in Cleveland. In addition, Mr. Apisdorf studied at the Aish HaTorah College of Jewish Studies in Jerusalem for five years where he received his Rabbinic Ordination in 1995. Mr. Apisdorf is also the author of *The Passover Survival Kit*, *The Survival Kit Family Haggadah*, *The One Hour Purim Primer*, and the co-author of *The Death of Cupid: Reclaiming the Wisdom of Love, Dating, Romance, and Marriage*.

Shimon Apisodorf can be reached at sjapisdorf@earthlink.net

Enjoyed Israel in a Nutshell?

Other books by Shimon Apisodorf, available online at [The Jewish Literacy Foundation](#).